DYSLEXIA ON THE DEFENSIVE

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Please note:
This article is about dyslexia in the workplace but all the information in it applies equally to other specific performance difficulties such as dyspraxia, ADHD and specific maths difficulties.

Nowadays dyslexia is much less ‘on the defensive’ than it was a few decades ago. It is more likely to be recognised early and to be regarded not as a shameful weakness but simply as a manageable set of difficulties – at worst a nuisance and at best a challenge, an opportunity to develop skills and abilities that may be less well-developed in non-dyslexic people.

However, many people, particularly those now in middle age or older, may feel less positive about their difficulties. They may not even know that their difficulties are dyslexic in nature – or even if they do know, they may feel reluctant to speak about them publicly.

No doubt there are also some young people who have unidentified dyslexic difficulties. And if such a young person goes straight from school into the workplace, their difficulties could easily remain unrecognised, as dyslexia awareness is still far less general among employers than among education professionals.

Again, a young person, even if he has realised he is dyslexic, may have reasons for not talking openly about this – for example, he may fear it would upset his family to hear he had such difficulties. (In this chapter he is used for he/she except in the case studies.) In some cases family reluctance to acknowledge a dyslexic problem ‘in their midst’ can be so strong that they will refuse to accept the clear findings of a dyslexia assessment, and continue to insist that the family member in question has no significant problems.

Thus, even today, there are still many and varied reasons why dyslexia might be on the defensive. In this chapter I shall discuss this issue in a workplace context, and I shall look at three different scenarios:
1. An employee is aware that he is having difficulties at work, but does not recognise his difficulties as dyslexic.

2. An employee knows or suspects that he is dyslexic, but fears to disclose this to his employer in case it costs him, if not his job, at least prospects of promotion.

3. A dyslexic employee has disclosed his difficulties to his employer, but finds that the employer, and possibly also his colleagues, are unsympathetic.

**Scenario 1: Dyslexia not recognised**

In general human beings find uncertainty to be threatening. Although we are aware that we develop over time, and probably welcome this, at any given moment we like to feel that we have a stable and coherent self-image, and that we have a good understanding of ourselves, of both our strengths and our weaknesses.

A feeling commonly experienced by an ‘undiagnosed’ dyslexic person is that he doesn’t really know who he is: he seems to be a puzzling muddle of strengths and weaknesses. At some moments he may feel himself to be an intelligent person – he can catch on quickly to another person’s meaning, he has an intellectual curiosity and a general desire to learn; at other moments, perhaps whenever he attempts higher-level study or takes on a challenging job, he feels more like a fool – constantly making errors, forgetting things and failing to get himself properly organised.

To a dyslexia assessor, this collection of inefficiencies is immediately recognisable as a common syndrome of difficulties, all of which relate to each other in meaningful ways; however, to the person who experiences them, they often feel bewildering, even shaming. Inevitably the emotional consequences are lack of confidence, low self-esteem, frustration, even depression. And what may follow on from this is a sort of social nervousness, a reluctance to take part in conversations or discussions, perhaps a tendency to avoid other people – often with the result of being seen as a loner, an outsider, an unfriendly or difficult person.

This situation will also present genuine difficulties to the managers and colleagues of such an ‘undiagnosed’ dyslexic person: they may feel baffled and annoyed at his inefficiency, resentful that they have to constantly re-check or re-do his work, and be
offended by his social manner. All this is likely to make them less helpful to him if he is finding difficulties with his job, and this will increase his difficulties still further.

The story of Muriel, a forty-year-old woman, who worked as a care assistant, illustrates this:

Muriel had always found difficulty with work that required writing skills, but she had excellent social and practical skills; she had good relationships with her clients and felt confident that she could make sensible judgements about their needs. She did have some difficulty with the paperwork attached to the job, but fortunately this was quite a small element in her work, and she had help with it both from a sympathetic colleague and from her son who was now in his final year at school. In general Muriel was regarded as a hard-working and valuable employee, and she enjoyed her work.

Then in the space of a single year everything changed. The agency that Muriel worked for introduced a more efficient management style and changes were made to Muriel’s job specifications. She was now obliged to keep careful written records of her meetings with clients, to take a more prominent role in meetings, and to do some informal supervision of a trainee. At the same time the sympathetic colleague who had always helped her moved on to another job, and her son entered a university in another town, and so was rarely at home to give her any assistance.

Muriel suddenly found herself, to use her own expression, ‘discombobulated’. She tried to cope with the situation by working longer hours, but this simply caused her to feel tired and stressed, and led to her being even more inefficient at work. She felt frightened to speak about her difficulties to her colleagues or to her line manager, because she felt she would be seen as a failure.

It was not long before Muriel began to dread going into the office at all. She felt that the people around her were starting to become impatient with her and whereas before she had been regarded as an asset, she was now being seen as something of a liability. As so it was that Muriel, who had previously enjoyed her job and the companionship of her colleagues, now began to take days off because of stress. Eventually the situation became so bad that she had to take an extended period of sick leave because of anxiety and depression. All her attempts to return to work failed, and in the end it was more with relief than sorrow that Muriel heard she had been dismissed from her post.

But even worse for Muriel than losing her job was the way she had now come to feel about herself: useless, despairing, bewildered. She described herself as ‘a waste of
space’ and felt that she could not succeed in anything. It had got to the stage where even simple household tasks seemed overwhelming.

But then, suddenly, life took an unexpected turn. Muriel happened to hear a radio programme on the subject of dyslexia. In the programme a woman who described herself as dyslexic explained to the listeners about all the problems she had, and the way they had affected her performance at work. As the woman talked on, she mentioned problems not just with literacy but also with memory and general organisation, and Muriel had the odd experience of hearing herself described: the same problems, the same workplace difficulties, and most of all the same debilitating emotions.

At the end of the programme a helpline was given and, after a few days of hesitation, Muriel telephoned the helpline number. That was the moment when her life turned around, ‘the moment of revelation’, as Muriel herself always called it. As a result of her talk with the helpline adviser, she found a local adult dyslexia group and also started to do some classes in literacy, communication skills and work organisation.

There was no instant transformation in Muriel, but she had suddenly found an explanation for her difficulties; she had found a way forward, a focus and a purpose. The negative emotions she had been experiencing gradually faded away; she became calmer, more confident and more appreciative of her good qualities. She was able to get her difficulties into perspective, realising that they were not something to be ashamed or embarrassed about. Within a year she became confident enough to think about looking for a new job, and, with the advice of a dyslexia careers adviser, she found a niche that suited her: she became a counsellor in a school for children with learning difficulties.

Scenario 2: Dyslexia recognised, but not disclosed

A common question that dyslexic people ask is: when I apply for a job, should I tell my potential employer that I’m dyslexic? Usually there is no simple ‘yes or no’ answer to this question; various factors need to be taken into account.

There are a number of reasons why a person may not disclose his dyslexia:

- He may feel embarrassed about it.
- He may not feel embarrassed, but simply feel it is a private matter.
- He may have developed compensatory strategies and so feel that his dyslexia will not affect his ability to do the job he has applied for.
• He may feel that, even though he himself is confident he could do the job, an employer might doubt his abilities.

On the other hand disclosure has a number of benefits. It allows the applicant to request reasonable adjustments during the recruitment process – and these could enhance his chances of gaining employment. It will also enable him to request reasonable adjustments as soon as he is in post, giving him the support he needs to perform effectively. It will also offer him legal protection, as an employee who has disclosed his dyslexia cannot be placed on a capability order or be dismissed until reasonable adjustments have been properly trialled. It also has the advantage that the dyslexic employee will not have the stress of having to conceal his difficulties and perhaps having them misinterpreted as being the result of laziness or incompetence.

If a job applicant has disclosed his dyslexic difficulties to his potential employers, the likelihood of his being given the job will depend very much on his performance in the interview. If the applicant seems defensive or awkward about his difficulties, this is not likely to impress an employer. If, on the other hand, he is able to talk confidently about his dyslexia, to explain that he has strategies for dealing with his difficulties, and that with reasonable support he will be able to perform in the job effectively, then all this could be very much in his favour – the employer could well see him as being assertive, enterprising, honest, ambitious, and determined to work hard to achieve his goals.

There are a number of reasonable adjustments that a dyslexic applicant could request at the application stage. He could request that he be allowed to have some brief notes with him during the interview, explaining that this will allow him to express himself more clearly; and he could ask for the interviewers to be sympathetic if he needs a little extra time to formulate his answers, or if he needs to have a question repeated.

Everything that has been said in this chapter so far about dyslexic people also applies to people who have other specific performance difficulties, for example dyspraxia. For an illustration of a skilful way to manage an interview, I shall present the case of Maureen, a severely dyspraxic person, who was preparing for her first interview with her new line manager.

Maureen felt anxious that she would not be able to explain to the line manager the nature of her difficulties and how they might affect her work. She took control of the situation by writing down clearly on one side of an A4 sheet her main difficulties, stating
in each case what strategies she had for dealing with them, and how the employer could be helpful.

At the interview, when the line manager began to ask about her dyspraxia, Maureen spoke out in a confident – not anxious or demanding – way. She explained she had felt worried that she might fail to explain her problems clearly, and so she had made a written note of them. She then handed this note to the manager.

This had several beneficial effects: Maureen felt less anxious in the interview because she knew that, come what may, she would be able to get her message across. The manager was very impressed with Maureen’s efficiency and pro-active attitude, and was grateful for the fact that he could now easily pass Maureen’s information on to relevant colleagues. In this way Maureen used the interview process itself to demonstrate how she could turn her weaknesses into strengths, and act in a way which would be helpful to both her managers and colleagues.

Scenario 3: Dyslexia disclosed, but with bad results

People who have disclosed their dyslexic difficulties to an employer will probably expect their managers and colleagues to be more understanding of, and sympathetic to, their situation. Alas, this is not always the case. Sometimes, when reasonable adjustments are put in place to support an employee, these are seen by others in a negative light. There can be a perception that the employee is ‘skiving’, or covering up fundamental inefficiencies, or getting some kind of unfair advantage. Below, I shall give some examples of how such negative feelings on the part of colleagues or managers can escalate from resentment to hostility.

Leila worked as a Customer Adviser in a call centre. When a customer telephoned with a query, Leila either dealt with this herself, or, if appropriate, referred it on to another department. Simultaneously she had to make notes on the computer of how she had dealt with the call. The advisers were given targets for the number of seconds they should take on each call, but Leila rarely managed to meet the target time. Further, the notes she made on the computer were often incomplete or garbled.

She was referred for a cognitive assessment, which showed that she had some dyslexic difficulties and also significant visual stress problems. The latter made looking at a computer screen very tiring for her, and so, during the course of her working day, she became more and more fatigued, stressed and inefficient.
Reasonable adjustments were put in place: Leila was supplied with a screen reading ruler to reduce her visual stress problems; she was allowed a slightly longer time than her colleagues for dealing with calls, and she was also permitted regular short rest breaks. Leila herself was content with these arrangements, but her colleagues were not. They continually made jokes about her special privileges and started referring to her as ‘Your Highness’. Leila felt very upset and anxious about this, and this led her to becoming ever more inefficient, and so needing even more breaks. This in turn led to an increase in the resentment felt against her. Although her manager was prepared to support her, the unsympathetic attitude of her colleagues eventually led to her leaving this job.

A similar situation arose with Jonathan, an Administrative Assistant in a government department. Jonathan had difficulty with any task that required him to follow the alphabetic sequence, for example, filing or putting letters in pigeon holes. He had himself developed strategies for dealing with this problem – in particular, he made good use of an alphabet arc – but he was still relatively slow in doing these alphabetic tasks. Here again, the line manager concerned was sympathetic, and dealt with the situation by re-allocating some of Jonathan’s work to other people. However, this caused resentment, because some colleagues felt that they were being required to work harder because of Jonathan’s inefficiency.

The above examples show how easily a dyslexic person can become victimised, even demonised. One reason for this may be that, while somebody who is obviously disabled, for example a blind person, is readily accepted as having genuine difficulties, a person with ‘hidden’ difficulties, such as dyslexia, can be regarded as being, at best, work-shy, and at worst a fraud.

These difficult situations resolve themselves in many different ways: sometimes the dyslexic person decides the situation is intolerable and leaves the job; in other cases the person concerned may receive help and support which enables him to become more confident and assertive and so to stand up to hostility or bullying; sometimes extra help can be provided in the form of a support worker, thereby obviating the need for work to be re-allocated to others; sometimes dyslexic employees can, with appropriate training, improve their skills sufficiently to be efficient in their job, even at the cost of sometimes having to work longer hours than their colleagues.

However, for a successful outcome, it is usually not enough for a single employee to be made more efficient, or a single manager to become more sympathetic: there needs to be a whole-organisation culture of understanding of, and support for, people who have ‘hidden’ difficulties. Only then can a person with such difficulties be enabled to work to their
full potential and be protected from resentment, hostility and bullying from managers or colleagues.

A common theme in all the case studies I have reported in this article is that many problems arise out of a lack of understanding of dyslexia, and in particular its effects in the workplace. This lack of understanding can be in the dyslexic employee himself – he may not recognise his difficulties as dyslexic. Even if he does understand the nature of his difficulties, he may not know how to present these in a way that allows other people to help him. Or there may be a lack of understanding of dyslexia in a dyslexic person’s immediate family or social circle, and in his workplace.

As regards the workplace, there is an obligation on employers not only to give appropriate support to dyslexic employees, but also to have sufficient awareness of dyslexic difficulties to be on the alert for these -- even in cases where an employee himself has not realised he is dyslexic, or has not disclosed his difficulties. (At the end of this article suggestions are made for awareness training courses for employers.)

As regards the dyslexic person himself, an understanding of his difficulties usually brings a sense of relief, as he is now enabled to assemble all his puzzling inefficiencies into a coherent picture; and this helps him to explain his problems in a clear and confident way to other people. However, for many dyslexic people who have been unaware of, or keeping secret, their dyslexic difficulties for many years, confidence does not come overnight. It may take time for them to come to terms with the fact that they have been in a muddle about themselves for many years, that they have consequently lost opportunities for study or work, and that they have perhaps been let down by other people who should have recognised their difficulties or been more sympathetic to them.

Nonetheless if dyslexic difficulties are fully recognised and confidently disclosed to other people, if appropriate support in the way of skills training and counselling is provided, then the more likely it is that a dyslexic person will get off the defensive and, without moving to the opposite pole of aggressiveness, become able, in both his professional and social life, to confront the world in an assertive and confident way. And it is the way of the world that the more a person respects himself, the more respect he tends to get from the people around him.

For a detailed discussion of these issues, see:
Chapter 7  Disputes around dyslexia
Chapter 10  Dyslexia: attitudes and emotions
Information Point A: Disclosure guidelines

Chapter 1  Dyslexia in the workplace
Chapter 7  Emotions
Chapter 18  Working with dyslexia
Chapter 19  Reasonable adjustments

Quick introduction with self-help strategies:
Dyslexia: How to Survive and Succeed at Work.

Awareness training for employers is offered by:

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